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Author(s): Father Leo Desmet

Source: *The Journal of Race Development*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Apr., 1913), pp. 457-466

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29737971>

Accessed: 17/07/2014 19:34

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ORGANIZATION AND RECENT WORK OF THE CATHOLIC MISSIONS IN CHINA

*By Rev. Father Leo Desmet, for Thirteen Years a Missionary
in Mongolia*

The Chinese Empire is divided into five ecclesiastical regions, and each region is subdivided into vicariates apostolic corresponding to our American dioceses.

Vicariates are presided over by vicars apostolic, who bear the title of bishop, but are directly dependent on the Congregation of the Propaganda in Rome.

The vicars apostolic of each region meet together every five years, to discuss the problems of administration, education and propaganda, and to ensure uniformity of method and discipline in the different vicariates. The result of their deliberations is sent to the Congregation of the Propaganda which appoints a commission to examine the proposed regulations. When approved the rules suggested become law for the missions represented.

ORGANIZATION OF THE VICARIATES

Generally speaking the central organization of each vicariate is at the bishop's residence about which are grouped, as in the early ages, the higher educational institutions, namely the high school, the training school, the seminary.

In these schools the teachers aim to give the pupils a thorough knowledge of Chinese literature so that they may compare favorably with those of the public schools. Through the adoption of modern methods and text books, the pupils learn now-a-days as much Chinese in one year as they formerly did in three.

Outside the Chinese literature the course embraces bible history, church history, apologetics, history of China, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, Latin and

French or English. Mathematics, physics and chemistry appeal most strongly to the positive mind of the Chinese, and no punishment is so much dreaded by the pupils, as exclusion from these classes.¹

The best disposed and most intelligent among the students become priests. The others who wish to stay in the service of the mission are sent to the training school where they are educated to be teachers or catechists.

The eloquence, resourcefulness and wit of these catechists is astonishing. Traveling with the missionaries, they were asked questions at night in the inns, concerning the missions, their scope and the reasons of Christian belief. It was a real delight to us to listen to their explanations, with their peculiar Chinese arguments and comparisons. The foundation of numerous conversions was laid by these familiar conversations which often were protracted late into the night.

Candidates for the priesthood have to spend two years on philosophical and three years on theological studies. Before being ordained, they have to work as catechists for one year under the direction of a missionary.

I remember that one day, when the doctor of the French legation in Peking came to my residence to study the bubonic plague, as he did not speak Chinese he held a long conversation in Latin with one of our Chinese priests. He was surprised at the ease with which the latter used that language.

Formerly no school instruction was provided for Chinese girls, except in some wealthy families who hired private teachers. If I am not mistaken the Catholic missionaries were the first to open schools for them. Although instruction was rather elementary, it enabled them to read in their difficult idiom the prayer book, the catechism of Christian doctrine, the bible history and other religious books.

¹ I find in the *Calendrier annuaire* of the Observatory of Zikawei (Shang Hai) twenty pages devoted to the meteorological observations made by the seminarians of Sung shu tsui, tze, East Mongolia: Wind, temperature, atmospheric pressure, rainfall and some special phenomena as rain and snow by clear weather, yellow wind were observed with great accuracy for three years.

To spread that instruction, the bishops have organized training schools for young women where they are taught something of the Chinese classics, and drilled in the principles of Christianity and the methods of presenting it. A great number of these young students become nuns and devote themselves to the care of the orphans, the teaching in girls schools, and the instruction of the new converts of their own sex.

ORGANIZATION INTO DISTRICTS

Each vicariate is divided into districts, at the head of which is one of the more experienced missionaries. He is a consultor of the bishop and inspector of the different parishes; he makes up the statistics, distributes the money for the different works and takes care of the relations with the Chinese authorities. Very often he has to interfere in law suits. By the treaties, the Christians are free from local taxes imposed for purposes of the pagan religion such as building and repairing of pagodas, and holding theatrical performances in thanksgiving to the gods. Around old Christian centers, the non-Christians know and respect this exemption, but in the newer missions they often force the converts to pay these assessments. Should the latter refuse they are subjected to a thousand petty persecutions. The missionary tries first to settle the trouble on the spot, but this is often impossible, and then he must appear in court. On account of the many law-suits thus initiated the dean of the district is alone allowed by the bishop to have official relations with the mandarins. He generally knows the Chinese character well, and is not easily deceived by false reports.

PARISHES

Subdivisions of the district are known as parishes. In these are located a residence for one or more missionaries, a church, a school for boys, one for girls and often an orphanage. In Mongolia the parishes covered a large territory. Mine had an extension of 600 square miles: there lived

scattered among the pagans a Christian population of 1400 in 21 hamlets. The missionaries visit each village three times every year. The most important of these visits is in winter when the people are unemployed. According as the number and needs of our flock demanded, we remained in a village from four days to three weeks, holding service every morning and evening and preaching at each service.

In some hamlets is a chapel, with adjoining room for the priest to lodge in. Generally however we held services in some Christian home. Every traveler in Mongolia knows these Chinese houses: floor of clay, straw thatched roof, walls of mud mixed with straw, small square window set with paper instead of glass. No bed is in the room, but instead a k'ang that is a sort of oven or platform 2 feet high, underneath which passes the smoke from the kitchen fire on its way to the chimney. In winter with the k'ang as heating apparatus, with a sheep-skin coat, a fur cap and felt boots one could manage not to freeze. Life was pretty hard on these visits, especially on account of the uncleanness of the people, and we generally got acquainted with more than one kind of vermin.

During the day each Christian came to the priest to be examined on Christian doctrine and practice. After the evening service many Christians and pagans came to converse with the priest. The conversation covered such matters as Chinese customs of interest to us, and of western topics of interest to them. They asked questions about the different countries, the forms of government, the administration of the laws, the condition of the people, the charitable institutions, and the modern inventions; railroads, steamers, electric light, telephone, telegraph, etc.

Time spent in answering their sometimes childish questions was not lost: the people were made to feel more at home with the priest, their curiosity to learn of far off lands and happenings gave him a chance to explain the worth of Christian civilization. The close contact with his Christians, the personal interest he takes in each one of them (he knows them all by name) account for the attachment of the converts to their missionaries.

CONVERSIONS

A pagan comes to visit a Christian friend; the first thing he remarks is the absence of all images of idols. He hears the family sing their night prayers, is impressed and asks questions. His friend explains his belief and perhaps gives him a book to read. As his interest increases, he requests a more thorough knowledge of the strange religion. A catechist is sent to his home. Attracted by curiosity the men of the village flock around and every evening the teacher has a fair audience. The women in turn become interested, and want to learn more about Christianity. Two Chinese nuns (for they go by two's) are sent to instruct them.

Finally some families decide to embrace the new religion. They study the Christian doctrine and every night led by the teachers sing their prayers. When the instruction is well advanced, the missionary comes, completes the work of the catechists, and confers baptism on the catechumens. In many vicariates it is the rule to test these for two years before admitting them to baptism.

Conversions are also often effected through contact with a Christian family moving into a remote village, where the people never heard much about the Christian religion. They are attracted by the example of Christian life. In such way, a movement of conversions is often started in a region where the Christian religion was hitherto unknown, and brings into the church several thousand souls.

ORPHANAGES

The Chinese do not like female children. The baby girl is often deprived of the mother's milk in favor of an older brother. In the mission where I labored, the pagans did not throw the infant girls away, except in famine years, but poor people often sold them. Husbands in great need even sold their wives. The buyer of the baby girl brings her up to be a wife for his son, when he and she would be of age. Those children have a very hard life, being treated harshly and burdened with work above their strength.

Some parents knowing their little ones would be better treated in the orphanage bring them to the priest's residence. Under the care of Chinese nuns those innocent beings are well cared for, receive a good Christian education, learn cooking, sewing, and clothes-making, and in due time marry Christian young men. A great number of blind and cripple children are saved from abandonment through Christian charity. Strange calumnies are circulated about the orphanages, as for instance that the eyes and the heart of the children are pulled out and sent to Europe to make drugs. I know at least of one instance in which on account of that calumny, the parents starved slowly to death their girl of eight years of age, rather than bring her to the orphanage.

During prosperous years, few children are received, but when the harvest fails, they are brought in great numbers. Two years before my arrival, a great famine occurred in northern Mongolia. There had been no harvest for two years; on every road people lay dying of starvation. That year 250 children were received in one orphanage, and saved from starvation. When the missionary told me of the anguish he had passed through, not having the resources to save more people, I did not wonder that his face had become wrinkled and his hair white.²

QUALITY OF THE CONVERSIONS

The converts retain after their conversion some of their racial defects, but they acquire a greater sense of freedom, they favor western civilization, they understand the deficiency of their own culture; they have a strong faith, a great love of their religion, and are loyally attached to the missionaries.

During the Boxer uprising, in my parish, forty-two women and children were burned alive in a chapel, rather than give up their faith.

² A certain superstition prevents the parents from letting the children die in the house. A little before death they take them outside. Neither do they bury the small children. They wrap them in a piece of mat and leave them in a secluded place outside the village. Many times I saw a dog or a pig eating the tiny corpses. It is to be hoped that the new ideas will rapidly change this and other strange customs.

Forty more of my people surrounded by the boxers were asked to deny their faith, and on their refusal, were slaughtered in cool blood.

While we were besieged, during an armistice, the Boxers promised immunity to the Christians, if they would only deliver to them the two European priests. I told my men that if they thought it would do them any good, we were ready to die. They answered: Father, we promised to stay with you for life or death, we will stand by what we said and the battle went on.

A review of the Catholic missions would not be complete without statistics:

The latest I could find about the Catholic schools, was Krose's *Katolischen Missionen statistik* which gives in 1907 4857 schools with 118,013 pupils male and female.

In 1909 there were in China, 1,210,054 Catholics, 45 bishops, 1424 European and 631 native priests, 1215 seminarians, 229 European and 130 native lay brothers, 558 European sisters and several thousand Chinese nuns, 13,000 mission places, 8500 churches, chapels and oratories, 400 orphanages with about 24,000 pupils, and 600 dispensaries, hospitals and homes for old people (Cf. *Herder's Konversation lexikon*: Supplement 1911.) The *Calendrier annuaire* of the Observatory of Zi-ka-wei (Shanghai), 1912, gives for 1910-11: Number of bishops, 49; European priests, 1426; native priests, 627; number of Catholics, 1,363,697. That publication is very reliable.

RESOURCES

Considering the small resources of the Catholic missions this seems a satisfactory result. In east Mongolia in 1906 we received from the Society of the Propagation of the Faith about 14,000 francs not quite \$3000. If we assume that the missionaries receive \$3000 more through their friends and relatives, that would make \$6000 to provide for 48 priests, 3 boarding schools, 15 residences, 66 schools, and a number of catechists. The Christians being generally poor, contribute very little. The possibility of keeping up these various works, can only be explained by the fact

that the cost of living is very low and that the missionaries not only receive no salary, but contribute to the work all the gifts made to them personally.

The great need of the day in China are higher educational institutions. The lack of resources alone prevents their foundation in every vicariate. Catholic high schools or colleges are established in Zi-Ka-wei; Shang-hai, Canton, Hong-kong, Tien-tsin, Pekin, Nan-kin, and even in Mongolia, for Christians and non-Christians, but they are too few. The Protestant missions are far ahead in that line of equipment. They have five modern educational institutions to every Catholic one. These schools are the best means of injecting some Christian spirit into the reform movement that pervades China.

The need of that spirit is apparent to all students of Chinese history. That great nation whose people are sturdy, intelligent, laborious, sober and patient and have so many great qualities, was ever held together by fear and torture. It passed through more bloody revolutions than any other country, and a spirit of anarchy is latent among the people, ready to explode any time. Indeed during the nineteenth century, I count thirteen uprisings and rebellions in comparison with which the revolutions of Christian nations look like child's play, in which more lives were lost than was the entire population of Europe in 1870. During the Taiping rebellion 20,000,000 people perished in the one province of Kiang-su. During the Tch'ang-mao-tze rebellion, Marshall Seng after crushing the rebels on the battlefield, pacified the south of the province of Cheh-lih by beheading 100,000 men. Piracy and robbery are always practiced on a great scale, and the idea the people have of their morality is rather strange.

To put it in Chinese terms: Robbery, etc. Robbery for them is a very good business giving easy and big interest, but done with a big principal! One's head is the principal. In 1901 in a small town of Mongolia 280 robbers lost that principal in one row, after first seeing their chief ironed to death with red-hot flat irons.

Those facts should give some matter for reflection to those who exalt the Chinese civilization, without seeing its shortcomings, and deny the need of missionary work among them.

Viewing that work merely from the political and utilitarian standpoint, may we not reasonably conjecture that if ever, as seems quite possible, the yellow race should put his myriads against the armies of the white man, the Christian spirit infused even in the non-Christians by the work of the missionaries will serve to allay inter-racial bitterness, and the Chinese Christians will easily induce their fellow countrymen to trust the Christian nations, and enter into friendly relations with them. Is it not quite possible that the work of the missionaries may some day preserve from torture and slaughter the grandchildren of their critics?

This view partly answers the question sometimes asked: Is the vast expenditure of money and energy for the conversion of the Chinese really worth the while?

Looking at it from a religious standpoint, the Catholic believes that the saving of one soul would more than compensate for the entire outlay by Catholics and Protestants alike.

Progress in the work has been slow, first on account of the natural apathy of the Chinese people towards religious questions; Secondly on account of the frequent persecutions against the Christians, and the destruction of their lives and property in political disturbances and rebellions; thirdly on account of the prejudices aroused against the Christian religion by the greed of the western nations for Chinese territory and resources, the missionaries being much against their will implicated by some of the powers, and so being regarded as agents of the foreign aggressors; fourthly on account of the divisions of christendom, which the Chinese are not slow to note.

Notwithstanding all these obstacles, the outlook is fairly bright. Since the Boxer uprising, the conversions have enormously increased, and now that the educated among the Chinese are all eager for western methods and western culture, now that the spirit of civil and religious freedom

has conquered China, the missionaries will try to reap a big harvest of souls, and to instill into the nation at least a leaven of Catholicism. It is true, as long as the Catholics in China depend on foreign countries for their priests and resources, Catholicism cannot expect to take hold of any large part of the Chinese people, but it is the earnest desire of all concerned to see as soon as possible the Catholic Church in China presided over by native bishops ministered to by native priests and sustained by her own resources.